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ORIGIN AND SYMBOLISM OF THE TALISMANIC MOTIF "TİLSİM" (ENCHANTED SIGN) - "CHESSFIELD" IN AZERBAIJANI CARPETS

Grid motif with alternating black and white square cells in a checkerboard pattern emerged and was used as a magical sign long before the game of chess was invented. The game of chess uses this ancient motif as a playing field on which the struggle of chess pieces unfolds according to the principle of "friend or foe". The goal of the struggle is the victory of “one’s own (good)” over “someone else’s (evil)”. Symbolically, this duel represents the struggle between “good and evil.” In fact, before the invention of chess, this ancient “chess” motif symbolized the duality of the world and the processes occurring in it. The objective duality of the world and life was perceived by ancient people as the unity of two opposites, in which “good and evil,” complementing each other, permanently alternate in time, space, and life. “Good and Evil”, eternally present in the world, are characterized by an endless cyclical change. The alternation of “good and evil,” birth and death, day and night, success and failure, light and darkness, occurring for unknown reasons and not always having a logical algorithm, were perceived by the ancients as the result of the interaction in the world of good and evil spirits (later - good and evil gods). Alternating unexpected and inexplicable "twists" in life and fate motivated people to seek protection from unfavorable life changes or malicious witchcraft, leading to negative turns of fate. In the absence of scientific knowledge, protection from “Evil” was sought in warding off “Evil” or the evil eye – witchcraft, as well as in magical fetishes or signs that served as a talisman. This is how the talismanic symbol “Tilsim” (a magic sign) - a “chessboard” with alternating black and white squares - arose and was applied to cult objects - dishes, jewelry and carpets.

Originating as a talisman, this motif was perceived as a magical sign, protecting from evil, the evil eye, and bringing good luck, wealth, and prosperity. The iconography of the sign represents the image of the endless change in time and space of light (good) and black (evil) in nature and human life. The alternation of white and black cells in the sign magically symbolizes the alternation of "good and evil," life and death, fertility and drought, success and failure, etc.

The contrasting alternation of cells of the same size and configuration symbolized the potential presence and balance of “good and evil” in life. The prevalence of good or evil in life depended on a person’s choice, which was made based on his will and found its concrete manifestation in the thoughts, words and actions of a person. The alternation of horizontal and vertical squares of contrasting colors forms a grid structure, the white and black cells of which have opposite symbolic content. Traditionally, light (white) colors symbolized ‘Good’, light, sun, life, and prosperity. Dark (black) color - symbolized "Evil", darkness, cold, the afterlife.

It can be assumed that the imbuing of this mesh "chess" motif with a magical meaning was originally associated with hunting and fishing magic, common among

primitive people. Hunting and fishing nets, invented as early as the Neolithic era, may have been an early utilitarian prototype of the magical symbol “Tilsim” “chessboard”. Painted on ceramic vessels, a piece of jewelry, or woven into fabric or carpets, this motif, according to its creators, possessed the same magical properties as a utilitarian net, acting as a ‘trap.’. The magical content of the sign was formed according to the principle of correspondence between the iconography of the concept and the utilitarian prototype (sympathetic magic). Unlike its utilitarian prototype, which served as a trap for animals, birds and fish, its magical sign served as a trap for “Evil”. In magical terms, the Tilsim sign, in the form of a “chess” grid, was an enchanted filter that held back “Evil” and let “Good” through.

The earliest depiction of the Tilsim (Chessboard) motif in Azerbaijan was found on a clay vessel shard from the excavations of Kultepe II (Nakhchivan) and dates back to the Bronze Age (3,700 years ago). Later, this motif as a talisman is also found in archaeological artifacts of the ancient era, which indicates that the belief in the magical protection of the “chessboard” motif persisted in ancient times. Motif has been found on numerous religious and everyday objects of this era, among which the most ancient is the image on the bottom of a religious golden bowl found in Hasanlu (Iranian Azerbaijan), in the ruins of an ancient Zoroastrian temple (8th century BC).

With the spread of Islam, this ancient protective motif did not disappear; belief in its magical protective power continued to persist, as evidenced by its images on ceramics from the Seljuk era (11th-13th centuries). A commonly accepted protective amulet of the Muslim era was the 99 beautiful names of Allah written in Arabic script in a grid pattern.

The grid-like arrangement of Allah's names introduced the old magical protective motif of the "chessboard grid" into a new, Islamic monotheistic context and thus legitimized the mystical protective power of the ancient symbol in a new, Muslim environment. Since that time, the “Tilsim” (“chessboard”) motif has often been present in the written texts of Muslim amulets (dua/prayer), worn on the human body in special cloth bags or amulet cases (Hamail, Muska, Tavez).

The magical symbol “Tilsim” (“chessboard”) was also embroidered on special undershirts (Tilsimli köynək – Magic Shirt), worn by warriors under chain mail when going into mortal combat with the enemy. The magical symbol in the form of a “chessboard” grid also appears on numerous Azerbaijani carpets, in which it is present in the form of contrasting square cells reminiscent of a “chessboard”.

Most often, the “Tilsim” motif is present in the design of the carpet border, where it literally “fulfills” its direct purpose – protecting the interior space of the carpet from “Evil”. In Shirvan carpets, this motif can often be seen as the main motif of the carpet medallion (Göl). Small motifs of this kind were often woven randomly, with the aim of filling sparse areas of the carpet’s inner field.

“Tilsim” (“Chessboard”) motif on Azerbaijani carpets is often found on images of birds, animals and fantastic creatures. No less frequently, it is found in images of the dragon, which in Azerbaijani folklore is a mystical character that brings good luck and prosperity. The presence of this ancient mystical motif in images of birds, animals, and

dragons speaks to the long-standing preservation of the magical protective function of this ancient motif in the carpet tradition of Azerbaijan.

Conclusion

1. “Tilsim” (Chessboard) motif in Azerbaijani carpets has an ancient origin, dating back to the Bronze Age (3rd millennium BC). The motif arose as a magical talisman to protect against evil spirits. White and black cells of the talisman magically filtered out “Good” and “Evil”, allowing the former into a person’s life and holding back the latter.

2. Belief in the magical power of the talisman “Tilsim” continued into the Ancient Period. Pantheistic cults, and later the Zoroastrian teaching on the struggle between “Good and Evil,” introduced the ancient mystical sign into the context of the symbolism of their era.

3. With the spread of Islam, the mystical sign of “Tilsim” (Chessboard) was introduced into the context of Islamic monotheism (Tawhid). According to Islamic doctrine, mystical protection was provided not by the primordial magical context of the sign, but by the one and omnipotent Allah, present everywhere, always and in everything. The presence of Allah in the cells of the protective motif “Tilsim” was indicated by writing 99 beautiful names of Allah in the cells. The written name of Allah itself is considered to be the most powerful protective talisman. On the other hand, the Muslim doctrine of the invisibility of Allah and his presence in everything and everywhere predetermined a return to the old iconography of the ancient motif with a simple, “chessboard” alternation of black and white cells. The teaching about the presence of Allah everywhere, in everything and always, changed the ancient discourse of the motif, but preserved and even increased its protective power by the invisible presence of Allah himself in it. The presence of this motif in Azerbaijani carpets served as a talisman, warding off the “evil eye,” protecting against “evil” and “black magic,” and also promoting wealth and prosperity for the home and family. The small diamond-shaped “Tilsim” sign was traditionally called “Göz” (Eye) by Azerbaijani weavers, which once again confirms its purpose to avert the gaze of the envious, “evil eye”.

Sources

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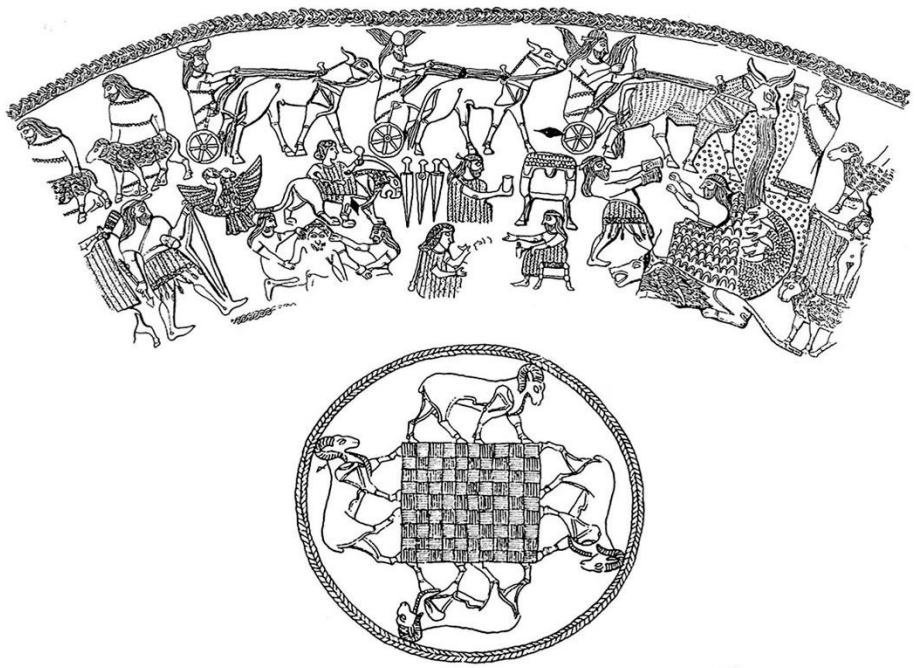
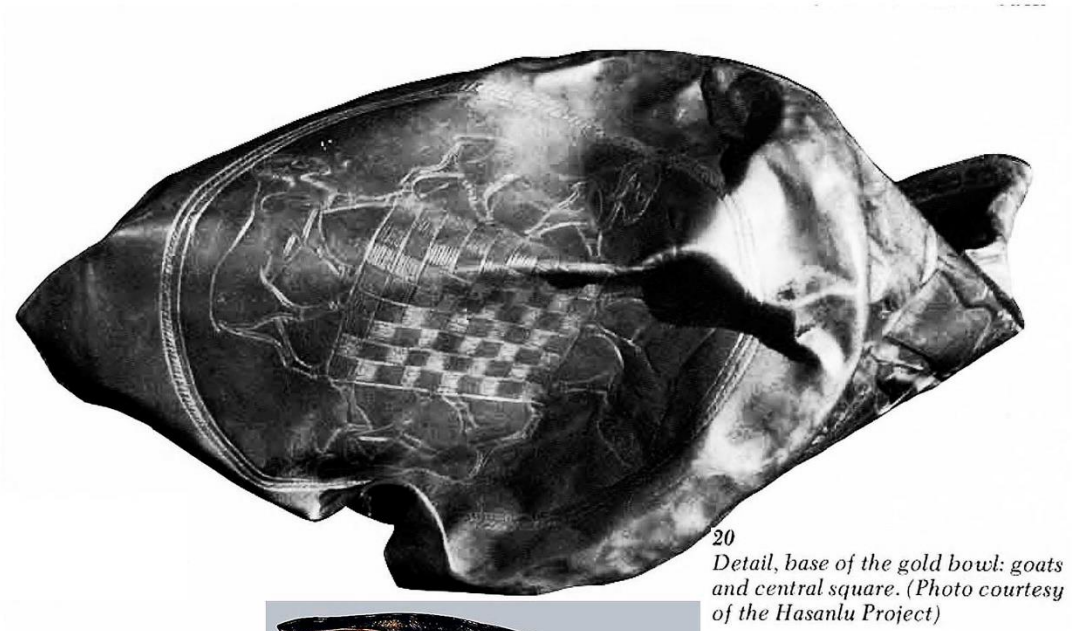
2. Telman Ibrahimov. CAUCASIAN FLAT-WOVEN DRAGON CARPETS Verni(Verneh) and Zili(Sileh). 2021, p.3
https://www.academia.edu/45106400/CAUCASIAN_FLAT_WOVEN_DRAGON_CARPETS_VERNI_and_ZILI
3. Azerbaijani Carpets. Scientific Magazine. Vol.3, №8, 2013. P-s 69-77

Illustrations

A - Fragment of a clay vessel. Kultapa II, Nakhchivan (Azerbaijan), Bronze Age.
B, C. D – Ritual clay vessels. Tepe Sialk, 10th-9th centuries BC, Central Iran





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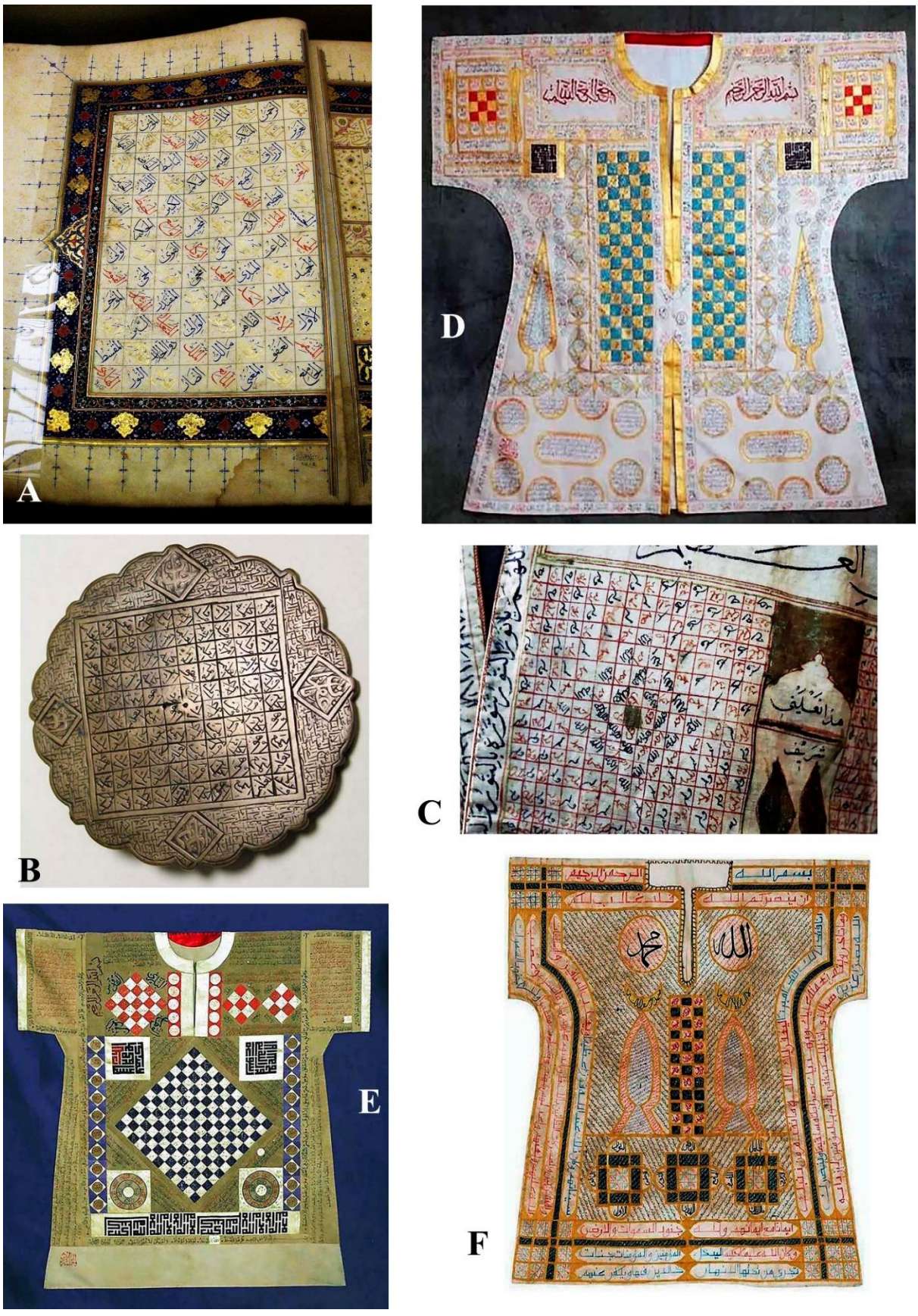
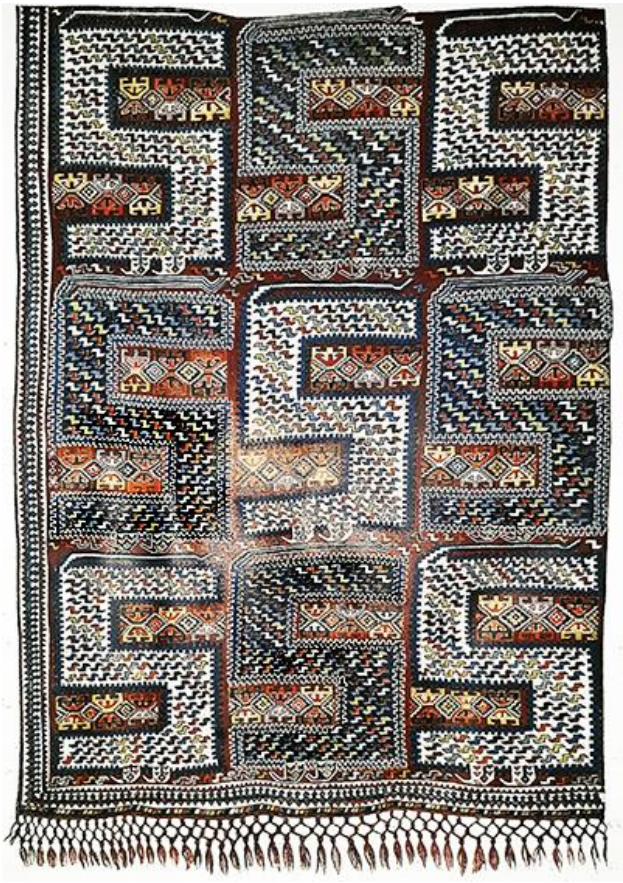
Detail, base of the gold bowl: goats and central square. (Photo courtesy of the Hasanlu Project)

Ritual Gold Bowl. 9th century BC, Hasanlu, Iranian Azerbaijan

Ceramic dishes, 11th-12th centuries. Seljuk Turks, Iran.



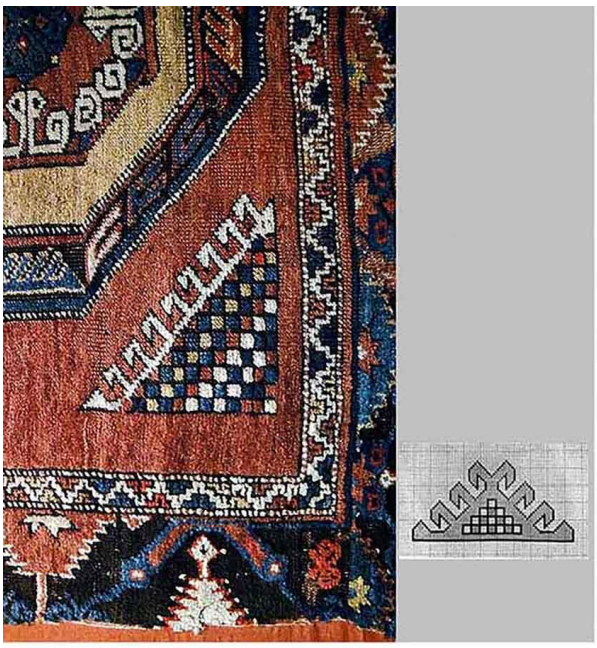
Enchanted warrior's undershirts ("Tilsim köynək"). Ottoman Turkey, 16th-17th centuries.



Flatwoven "Verni" carpet. Azerbaijan, late 19th century.

Flatwoven carpet. Azerbaijan, 18th century. Private collection

“Tilsim” (Checkerboard) Motif in Shirvan Carpets. Azerbaijan



“Tilsim” (Checkerboard) Motif in Shirvan Carpets. Azerbaijan